

Matter of Fact

Great, Unnoticed Achievement

By Joseph Alsop

AT THE time of the Bay of Pigs, President Kennedy used to cite a single fact as the decisive answer to those who thought the landing in Cuba should have been directly supported with American military power. The fact was that over and above the divisions already tied down in Germany and elsewhere, the President then had only 14,000 combat-ready troops available for emergency commitment.



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In the closing period of President Eisenhower's Administration, former Secretary of Defense Thomas Gates did a surprising amount to repair the damage done at the Defense Department in the earlier Eisenhower years. But maintenance of large numbers of combat-ready U.S. troops ran too hard against the grain of that period.

WHEN one recalls that this was how matters stood only a little more than six short years ago, the contrast with the present becomes dramatic. In truth, it is downright astonishing that no one has even noticed the magnitude of Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara's achievement, as strikingly proven by recent events.

With a heavy and increasing troop commitment in South Viet-Nam, the Defense Department was able, on a moment's notice, to put another very large force into Santo Domingo. The first element of this force, the 82d Airborne Division, was airlifted to the island almost in a matter of hours. And the only casualty in this huge, complex and risky operation, which continued by night as well as by day, was a single flat tire on a single troop carrier plane.

At the moment, some

14,000 American soldiers are still deployed in Santo Domingo, and the current total in Viet-Nam is 55,000. Large additional forces are also known to be en route to Viet-Nam, where the planned total will eventually rise to nearly 90,000 men—unless the target was quietly raised once again during Ambassador Maxwell Taylor's visit to Washington.

Further evacuation of Santo Domingo appears unlikely for some time to come. Therefore, the United States will have no less than 100,000 men on trouble spot combat duty overseas, when and if the planned total is reached in Viet-Nam. And this will be in addition to the U.S. divisions permanently stationed in Europe, in South Korea and so on.

NOR IS this all. Instead of being kept on a quarter-ready or a half-ready status, as large segments of the armed services used to be, the great majority of Army, Navy and Air Force units are now required to be in a

state of full readiness at all times. Indeed, the Secretaries of the Army, Navy and Air Force are now required to certify this ready-status in writing when the Defense Department budget goes to the President.

In addition, the air transport capability of the Eisenhower era is being increased so rapidly that very large forces will soon be almost completely air-transportable. And finally, the total of troops on special combat duty overseas can at any time be raised to the quite astonishing figure of 150,000 men, without undue strain and without necessitating any call-up of reserves.

Over-all, this achievement of the Defense Department under Secretary McNamara's leadership is without any real parallel in the history of modern government in the United States. Solely because of this achievement, the forces needed have been

ready and waiting when the need arose.

THE EXTENT of the future need remains an open question, however. There has even been much confusion about the role of the U.S. troops already in Viet-Nam—there are times, in truth, when the Johnson Administration's public information policies seem to be modeled on the sepia-squirt squid. But the plain truth is that the troops are there to give "combat support" to the South Vietnamese units, when and if such support is required.

Active "combat support" may indeed have been given before these words are printed. In addition, the U.S. staff in Saigon is known to wish to put at least one full American division well inland, on the high plateau of South Viet-Nam, in positions that would tend to block the entry of additional troops and supplies coming down the Ho Chi trail from Laos. No doubt this question was discussed while Gen. Taylor was here.

From combat support, to stationing a U.S. division far inland on the plateau, to full scale engagement in the Korean style, are obviously steps that can be taken by imperceptible degrees. The watchword here, nowadays, is that the outcome depends on the fighting in South Viet-Nam. And it is certainly true that the war can swiftly be lost in the South, if the Communists attain their summer objective, which is to break the resistance of a large part of the South Vietnamese army.

But the way to avoid another Korea is still to bring pressure on the North, not indiscriminately, not bloody-mindedly, but sternly, firmly and with growing power. For even if the enemy fails to attain his summer objective in the South, pressure that the North really feels will still be needed to keep the enemy from digging in for another try later on.